

US to ban flavored vaping products as lung disease cases surge

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US President Donald Trump's administration announced Wednesday it would soon ban flavored e-cigarette products to stem a rising tide of youth users, following a spike in vaping-linked deaths.

The move could later be extended to an outright prohibition of vaping if

adolescents migrate to tobacco flavors, seen as more legitimate products that help smokers quit their habit.

Addressing reporters at the White House, the president said that both he and First Lady Melania Trump were worried as parents of a teenage son about an outbreak of severe lung disease that has killed six people and sickened hundreds.

"We are both reading it," he said. "A lot of people are reading, people are dying of vaping," he added, vowing to act.

Trump was accompanied by Ned Sharpless, the acting head of the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) that regulates e-cigarettes and by Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar, who responded to a question about the proposed timeline by saying his agency would issue rules in the coming weeks.

Following the release of new guidance, "there will likely be about a 30-day delayed effective date," said Azar.

"At that point, all flavored e-cigarettes other than tobacco flavor would have to be removed from the market."

The agency said in a release that non-tobacco flavors were being targeted for their youth appeal, with preliminary data for 2019 showing that more than a quarter of high school students had used e-cigarettes in the past 30 days.

The overwhelming majority reported using fruit, menthol or mint flavors.

While tobacco flavors will initially be exempt, manufacturers will still need to apply for FDA approval by May 2020 to continue to sell their

products.

But Azar also tweeted: "If data show kids migrating to tobacco-flavored products, we will do what's necessary to tackle continued youth use of these products."

The news was a major blow to the burgeoning vaping industry, worth \$10.2 billion globally in 2018, according to Grand View Research.

Mystery illness

It comes amid growing concern over how more than 450 people who reported recent use of e-cigarettes have fallen ill, with initial symptoms including breathing difficulty and chest pain before some were hospitalized and placed on ventilators.

Several teens across the country have been placed in medically-induced comas, including one whose doctors said he may require a lung transplant if he recovers.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has urged people to cease vaping while a nationwide investigation is underway.

Federal authorities have yet to identify a single substance common to all cases, but New York's health department is focusing its probe on counterfeit cannabis cartridges containing vitamin E oil, which is harmful when inhaled.

North Carolina medics have reported that patients developed acute lipid pneumonia, a non-infectious form of the respiratory illness that occurs when oils or fat-containing substances enter the lungs.

'Illegal' advertising

E-cigarettes have been available in the US since 2006 and were widely considered a safer alternative to traditional smoking, even though experts had warned even before the current wave of illnesses that it may take decades to learn about vaping's long-term effects.

While e-cigarettes do not contain the estimated 7,000 chemical constituents present in traditional cigarettes, a number of substances have been identified as potentially harmful and the vapor could contain traces of metal, according to a 2018 study prepared for Congress.

It's also not clear why the US is so far alone in reporting such cases, and whether they are even new, or only being recognized now by doctors after earlier misdiagnoses.

Whatever the case, wider public and political opinion appears to be hardening.

Trump's announcement received bipartisan support, including from his longtime Republican critic and former presidential candidate Mitt Romney, and several Democrats including Senate whip Dick Durbin, who commended the FDA for "doing its job."

Billionaire and former New York mayor Michael Bloomberg, who on Tuesday announced a \$160 million campaign to ban vaping, said the flavor ban was overdue and should come into effect immediately.

The FDA has become increasingly assertive against the sector over misleading advertising and on Monday accused market-leading e-cigarette maker JUUL of breaking the law, warning it to cease presenting itself as less harmful than smoking.

But shares in Altria, which holds a one-third stake in JUUL, were stable by 4:00 pm (2000 GMT), following the announcement.

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